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SIPDIS

STATE FOR EUR, EB, SPIRNIAK
FAS FOR BIOTECH GROUP, FAA/DEVER

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: ETRD EAGR KSTH
SUBJECT: Biotech Speaker in Turkey

Sensitive but Unclassified. Not for Internet Distribution.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Most Turks, including government officials, journalists and academics, continue to express concern with transgenic crops and food. Despite the available scientific evidence, most people continue to believe that food products made from transgenic crops are unsafe and should withheld from the market in order to determine the health risks associated with this technology, despite the fact that most supposed risks have been dismissed in the past 10 years. The possibility of EU membership and a lack of understanding of the situation in the European Union also add to the public perception of biotechnology. In an attempt to balance the debate, particularly in the press as well as addressing public concerns, post arranged for Dr. Bruce Chassy, a food microbiologist from Illinois University in Champagne, to visit Turkey. End Summary.

State of Play

¶2. (SBU) Turkey is a signatory of the Biosafety Protocol and is currently developing regulations to govern the introduction of transgenic crops. At the same time, Turkey imports large amounts of bulk commodities, with the United States supplying over $600 million of corn, soybeans, soybean meal, vegetable oil and cotton in 2004. Most of these commodities are either transgenic crops or produced from transgenic crops. Biotechnology is a concept that is not well understood in Turkey. Unfounded food scares related to the alleged use of hormones in tomatoes and carrots (yes hormones in tomatoes and carrots!) have heightened consumer concern in Turkey over food safety and exposed a complete lack of confidence in Turkish regulators. The government's failure to respond quickly and decisively to these issues has only vindicated alarmists intent on influencing public opinion regarding biotechnology.

Just the Facts

¶3. (SBU) In order to respond to public concerns and balance the mostly negative press, post arranged speaking engagements in four Turkish cities hoping to reach academics, government officials, students and business representatives. Dr. Chassy focused primarily on the development of transgenic crops compared with traditional plant breeding while also emphasizing the regulatory framework, the economic and environmental benefits and misconceptions about the technology. In addition, Dr. Chassy provided information on the development and use of the technology in developing countries such as China, India and Iran as well the health, economic and environmental benefits of transgenic crops.

Audience Response

¶4. (SBU) The audience response in each of the venues was similar. The majority of those attending the events who had scientific backgrounds seemed to understand the science and supported the technology. Others, particularly social scientists and economists, remained skeptical, insisting at times that Dr. Chassy was hiding information about the dangers associated with transgenic crops and, in particular, the food produced from these crops. Among the most frequent misconceptions mentioned during the visit were:

--The head of the Union of Turkish Agricultural Engineers claimed (apparently on television) that transgenic crops and food had lead to higher incidents of birth defects in the United States.

--GMOs have lead to higher incidents of cancer and food allergies in the United States.

--the United States was sending transgenic products to developing countries to test them on poor populations before using them in the United States.
--that the United States prohibited any GMOs in baby food.

--that the European prohibited all imports and planting of transgenic crops and food;

--somehow global warming and GMOs should be included in the same debate.

--denial that the amount of arable land is in decline and that world food production will have to increase to meet world population growth;

Typical Reaction: Don't understand it, but absolutely against it

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¶5. (SBU) Typical of the reaction by officials were the opening remarks at Sabanci University by a visiting Canadian professor who while acknowledging her lack of information or understanding of the subject nevertheless stated that she was against the technology because Mother Nature has done a good job on her own. We would note that despite her lack of understanding she decided not to attend 90% of the conference.

¶6. (SBU) During the visit, we met with a number of Turkish officials in responsible positions who had a role in approving this new technology. Despite acknowledging little understanding of the issue they nevertheless expressed a willingness to comment negatively on proposed legislation and express their opposition to the technology for extremely spurious reasons.

Potential for Agriculture Production

¶7. (SBU) However, several arguments did seem to resonate with some officials. The development of transgenic cotton in both China and India that require less fertilizer and pesticides drew signs of approval from the audience. Turkey has significant problems with cotton production and witnessing the advances in production in two these countries seemed to bear fruit. The second issue was the evidence that the European Union both imports and grows transgenic crops, albeit only a small amount for agricultural products. Still, Turks seem to view Europe as their only viable market and believe strongly that, given European concerns, Turkey should not accept transgenic crops. The Coca Cola, for example, demands gmo-free isoglucose for soft drink production despite the fact that the EU does not require the same.

Comment: Science versus Ideology

¶8. (SBU) It would appear that the issue of transgenic crops and food derived from these commodities has turned into a debate between science and ideology in Turkey. While the scientific evidence continues to mount on the benefits (health, economic, environmental) of this technology and its application in greater numbers of countries, Turks seem more inclined to rely on urban myths and ideology to frame the debate. At the same time, while questioning advocates of the technology, there is little or no questioning of those opposed to the technology. While the public might be forgiven for their lack of understanding, Turkish officials directly involved in discussing and legislating the future of the technology show little desire to understand it.

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